

Kelly Roberti

The *L.A. Reader* describes Bozeman jazz musician Kelly Roberti as an “earthy and meticulous bassist ... an heir apparent to the late Charles Mingus.”

High praise for an artist whose roots dive deeply in Montana soil. Roberti was raised in Bozeman by a family of music teachers and performers, and steeped in all musical genres as a child.

He played his first gig at age 11 and has gone on to tour with legends in the jazz, rock and world music, including Arnett Cobb, Eddie Harris, Peter Gabriel, Freddie Hubbard and Tommy Flanagan. Along the way, he’s performed at nearly every major venue, both clubs and festivals, on five continents.

During the late 80s, Roberti organized tours throughout the U.S., and also hired well-known recording artists to tour with his NRE trio, comprised of Roberti on bass, Bob Nell on piano and Brad Edwards on drums. He has recorded over 50 albums with some of the greatest jazz musicians in the world and currently tours with David Murray, the renowned jazz saxophonist and bass clarinetist.

Murray, who first discovered Roberti in the 1980s, recalls, “Touring the U.S. at the time was something that traveling salesmen did in more frequency than jazz artists. Kelly ... creatively put many legendary musicians to work in front of real jazz audiences in Montana and spanning the country. This is unheard of today and, truthfully, it was then.”

Pianist and MSU music professor Eric Funk describes Roberti as “an adventurous musician. As a composer and performer, he is extremely forward-looking and unique.”

The musician “stands among his colleagues as a seasoned, authentic jazz artist who has occupied the world’s stages with the legends,” Funk adds. “He is a true treasure to Montana.”

As a teacher and performer, Roberti is credited with inspiring generations of Montana musicians. “He teaches and mentors young musicians and is compelled to wield honesty into the mix of their musical training,” says Funk.

He’s also brought master musicians to the state, including Murray, Don Pullen and Emily Remler, and paired them with locals, both in workshops and performances.

“The essence of this American music is passed on through the unique mentoring of player to player in live performance,” writes jazz artist M.J. Williams. “Kelly made this possible for many Montana players through his persistent networking and his belief that great music can happen here too.”

He’s also helped introduce Montanans to jazz, beginning in 1982 when he helped found the Bozeman Blues and Jazz Society. He continued producing jazz performances over the next two decades, organizing more than 100 memorable performances by some of the greatest figures in jazz, including Nat Adderley, Eddie Harris, Tommy Flanagan, Ray Brown, Woody Shaw, Arnett Cobb and David “Fathead” Newman.

“Kelly was able to introduce to Montana the sounds of these great artists – sadly now mostly passed on – and in the process make himself known as an outstanding bassist and composer,” says one of the society’s co-founders, Ray Pratt, professor emeritus of political science at Montana State University.

“I can think of no single person I have known who knows more about jazz ...,” Pratt adds. “He has lived the music and lived and performed it with some of its greatest practitioners.”

“Jazz with Kelly Roberti,” a summer series launched at the Bozeman Public Library in 2008, has helped infect a younger generation with a passion for jazz, and reintroduce the genre to others.

The free series started as five programs aimed at highlighting the influence of jazz in Bozeman and showcasing local musicians. It evolved into “a must-see, nine-part series replete with many incredibly talented musicians donating their time, educational interviews conducted by Kelly himself, real-life musician stories from the road, riveting jam sessions, and soulful music all made available to the young and old of our community,” says Paula Beswick, the library’s foundation director.

She lauds Roberti for “his dedication, skill, and ability to bring the community together under the umbrella of music.”

“True music is an indefinable communication. It is physics, philosophy, history, mathematics and, to me, a big dose of romance,” says Roberti. “I want to give to it what I have been given. I want to contribute to the tradition, the true human condition and to the next generation.”

Profile written by Kristi Niemeyer for the Montana Arts Council.